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New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter

VOLUME IX NUMBER 3

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Birth of Christ The King Parish, Jersey City

On July 6, 1930, the Reverend Joseph A. Shovlin celebrated Mass for a small group of black Catholics in the funeral home of John E. White at 767 Ocean Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey. After the Mass, Father Shovlin hurried to the auditorium of St. Bridget's Church in Newark, where he again celebrated Mass for a small group of black Catholics. Thus Father Shovlin recalled the beginnings of the first black Catholic parishes in the Diocese of Newark when, years later, a colleague asked him for his recollections. His letter is now in the archives at Seton Hall University.

Blacks had composed almost eight percent of New Jersey's population at the first federal census in 1790 but, although their numbers increased from census to census, they proved a declining percentage of the population through most of the 19th century because of the large European immigration into the state. Beginning in the 1890s, southern blacks began to migrate north in search of a better life in the industrial cities, and many of them came to New Jersey. The migration leaped ahead during the years of World War I and in the 1920s, so that by 1930 the federal census counted almost 209,000 blacks in the state, 5.2 percent of the total population. Over half of the black population lived in the seven counties of the Diocese of Newark.

Among the newcomers were a small percentage of Catholics who found themselves at something of a loss in the North. They felt unwelcome in the Catholic parishes, whether territorial or ethnic, but there were no black Catholic parishes. Over the years some of them joined black Protestant churches, some stopped attending any church, and some persisted in attending Catholic parishes, however unwelcome they felt. Sometimes they



First confirmation class at Christ the King poses with Bishop Walsh in front of the church on June 29, 1932.

pushed for separate black parishes, but the clergy seemed to oppose the move. Perhaps the clergy were looking forward to an end of ethnic parishes, now that Congress had practically closed the doors of immigration, and were thus unwilling to start another series of separate parishes.

But blacks persisted in their efforts; a Mrs. Mary Ward conducted a census of blacks attending the various parishes of Jersey City and found some 300 scattered among a half-dozen churches.

In 1930, the rapid growth of the black population in the diocese and the obvious necessity of serving its needs led Bishop Thomas J. Walsh to appoint Reverend Joseph A. Shovlin to begin organizing black parishes. Shovlin had been born in Hazleton, Pennsylvania in 1888 and moved with his family several times before they finally settled in New Jersey. Ordained in 1915, he was an

assistant at All Saints' Church in Jersey City when Bishop Walsh tapped him for the new assignment.

He began by studying the situation of blacks in Hudson County and in the



Interior of Christ the King Church in the 1930s.

Continued from page 1



Girl Scouts of Christ the King pose on the steps of the Capitol with Congressman Cornelius Gallagher.

Church. He visited black parishes in Harlem and Brooklyn, consulted with the Catholic Board for Mission Work among the Colored People, and attended the Catholic Colored Convention in Detroit, Michigan. His recollections mention a plan for the development of the apostolate among blacks in the diocese, which called for establishing parishes in Jersey City and Newark first, then expanding to Paterson (at the time part of the diocese of Newark) and Englewood, and thereafter as needed.

C. Bion Jones, one of the early converts at Christ the King parish, recalled in 1948 that a public meeting was held at P.S. 14 on Union Street in Jersey City on the evening of July 3, 1930. Speakers included Monsignor

John A. Duffy, vicar-general of the diocese; Father Shovlin and John A. Matthews, a prominent Catholic layman of Newark and former state legislator. The meeting announced the formation of the parish and also the first Mass to be said on the following Sunday. Among others present were John and Margaret Smith of Jersey City, whose donation of \$50,000 in memory of their parents paid for the construction of the new church.

While the growing congregation at Jersey City continued to meet in White's Funeral Home or in a small building at 291 Forest Street which served as a parish house, groundbreaking for the new church on Ocean Avenue took place on August 12, 1930, and Monsignor Duffy laid the cornerstone on October 26, in the presence of some 4000 onlookers.

Building not of brick and mortar was taking place simultaneously. Missionary



The clergy and Holy Name Society starting toward the line of march for the 1953 Holy Name parade in Jersey City.

Sisters of the Most Blessed Trinity began active work in the parish in 1931, despite having a hard time finding a residence. At least one land purchase fell through when the seller found out the sisters would be working at Christ the King, and they vacated a residence on Bramhall Street because of opposition from parishioners of St. Patrick's. Finally, the sisters found a haven at 85 Oak Street, but only after they had spent almost a year commuting from Newark to Jersey City daily.

The sisters conducted catechism classes for children and adults, visited the sick at home and in hospitals, and ran parish centers, not only at the principal site on Ocean Avenue, but in Bayonne and at two subsidiary sites in other Jersey City parishes. They also helped to organize parish societies: the Holy Name Society, the Children of Mary, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the Madonna



Members of the C. Y. O. pose with one of the Trinitarian Sisters after a Communion Breakfast on May 21, 1944.

Circle (for mothers), and a parish library, as well as altar boys and choirs. They also lent a hand in the preparation of dramatic and musical productions which parish members presented. Later, the sisters also obtained an old country home in the Watchung Mountains and remodeled it into a retreat house for black Catholics.

On Sunday, December 20, 1931, Bishop Walsh dedicated the Church of Christ the King. C. Bion Jones particularly recalled the bishop's declaration: "You are welcome in any Catholic Church in this city or in the Diocese of Newark." The furnishings of the church were partly donated by Reverend Roger McGinley, pastor of St. Aedan's Church in Jersey City, and the baptismal font was given by Dr. Lena Edwards Madison, a prominent black physician in the city. Her daughter had been the first child bap-



Dais party at the 1959 Communion Breakfast of the Rosary Society.



Members of the 1946 parish basketball team receive the Department of Parks Sportsmanship trophy.

tized in the parish, and her husband, also a doctor, was the first convert baptized from the new font.

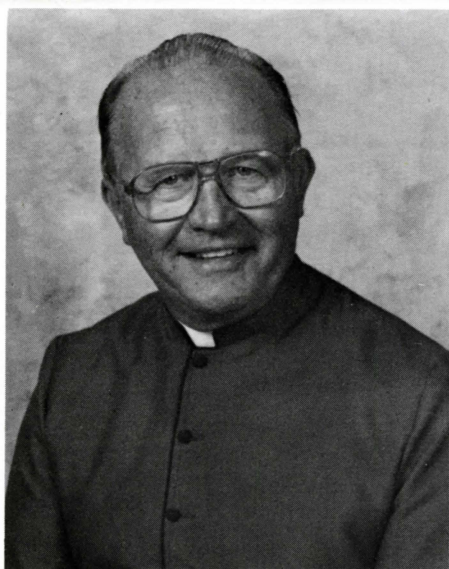
Walsh returned six months later to administer confirmation at the parish for the first time to 223 adults and young people. By then the parish was two years old, and had grown from the handful of people who attended the first Mass on July 6, 1930 to over 1200 members. One of the first converts was Mrs. Jeannette Jackson, who became instrumental in the conversion of some 300 others.

At the public meeting in July 1930, where the formation of the new parish was announced, John Matthews had compared the group present to the mustard seed of the gospel parable. In just two years, the tiny seed had grown and proven hardy. Sixty years later, it is still growing.



View of the interior of Christ the King Church.

MEET THE COMMISSION



Monsignor Joseph C. Shenrock

Monsignor Joseph C. Shenrock was born on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, October 4, 1926 in Oxford, New Jersey. After his education in local schools he began his studies for the priesthood at St. Charles College in Baltimore, Maryland in 1943 and received the Associate in Arts degree from this college in 1947. Two years later, he completed his baccalaureate studies at Saint Mary's University in Baltimore. After four years of theological studies at St. Mary's, he obtained the Bachelor of Sacred Theology degree, and on May 30, 1953 was ordained to the priesthood by Trenton's Bishop George W. Ahr in St. Mary's Cathedral.

Young Father Shenrock was first assigned as associate pastor to Sacred Heart Church in Mount Holly and after

five years there was transferred to St. Paul's in Burlington, New Jersey. In 1963, he became associate pastor at St. Mary of the Lake parish in Lakewood, New Jersey where he spent four years before being assigned to St. Joseph's in Forked River, New Jersey. In June 1970, Father Shenrock was named administrator of St. Pius X parish in Forked River and in December of the same year, was transferred to St. John Vianney in Colonia, New Jersey as pastor. In September 1971, Father Shenrock became pastor of Blessed Sacrament parish in Trenton, New Jersey and was serving in that position when he was named a Prelate of Honor by Pope John Paul I on September 19, 1978. In January 1987, Monsignor Shenrock was

Continued on page 4

re-assigned as pastor to the parish of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Whiting, New Jersey where he still serves.

Monsignor Shenrock has been a parish priest for his entire career, but he has, like most parish priests, also served in other diocesan capacities. In the past, he has been director of the Catholic Doctors' Guild of Burlington County, of the Catholic Youth Organizations of Ocean County, president and secretary of the Senate of Priests of the Diocese of Trenton, and director of the Diocesan Department of Social Concerns. Currently he serves as vicar for Social

Concerns of the Trenton diocese, as a pro-synodal judge of the diocesan marriage tribunal, and as a member of the Governor's Commission on Aging, among other positions.

Despite the busy schedule of a parish priest and the heavy demands made by his additional activities, Monsignor Shenrock has found the time and energy to pursue his scholarly and academic interests. In 1973 he received a master's degree in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary. In the following year, he obtained the Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the Angelicum in

Rome, and in 1979, he completed his doctorate at Clayton University in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1973 he participated in a Protestant-Catholic seminar in Rome and two years later took part in the Institute of Continuing Theological Education at the North American College there. In 1978-79 he held a fellowship to the Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies at Tantur, Israel.

Through all this, Monsignor Shenrock has maintained an abiding interest in the local history of the Diocese of Trenton and its parishes and has spoken frequently on the subject.



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